Alexander Pushkin. Self-portrait. 1826

SEMYON GHEICHENKO

Semyon Gheichenko is one of those remarkable people whose efforts help preserve for posterity historical and cultural treasures. He has been the curator of the Pushkin memorial estate in Pskov country for more than a quarter of a century. He first saw Mikhailovskoye during World War II, though not through the smoke of battle. Private of a mortar crew Semyon Gheichenko did not get quite as far as Pushkin Hills and was prevented from taking part in the fighting for that precious corner of his homeland by a wound. And the fighting there was stiff indeed. What did the nazis care for this holy of holies of Russian culture? They had dug an entrenchment under the famous oak at Trigorskoye, they blew up the bell-tower at Svyatogorsk Monastery and laid mines around Pushkin's grave. As they retreated, the nazis left nothing but desolation behind them.

The then President of the USSR Academy of Sciences Sergei Vavilov looked out Gheichenko whom he knew as an experienced literary historian from Pushkin House in Leningrad. "I am putting my trust in you," he said. "Get started on restoration work immediately." Gheichenko arrived at Pushkin Hills in the spring of 1945 and has been there ever since. The number of visitors who have come to pay homage to Pushkin at Mikhailovskoye has already passed the million mark. People come here from all parts of the globe. Important research is being conducted here. *Glimpses of Mikhailovskoye* which are published here are the work of a

writer who is infinitely skilled not merely in the presentation of factual material but also in carrying on where the documents end, in conjuring up a bygone era, thanks to his astute sense of the continuity between past and present.

The Pushkin memorial estate (which incorporates the villages of Mikhailovskoye, Trigorskoye and Petrovskoye and the former Svyatogorsk Monastery) is an essential part of the great poet's experience and work. Pushkin came here in 1817–1819, when he was "a gay youth" full of radiant hopes and noble aspirations; here he spent two long years (1824–1826) as an "outcast", an already famous poet exiled to the wilds for his love of freedom; shortly before his tragic death feeling sick and tormented, he longed to escape to Mikhailovskoye once more from the harassment of gendarmes and the society mob to work in its peaceful solitude, and it was here that he asked to be buried.

GLIMPSES OF MIKHAILOVSKOYE

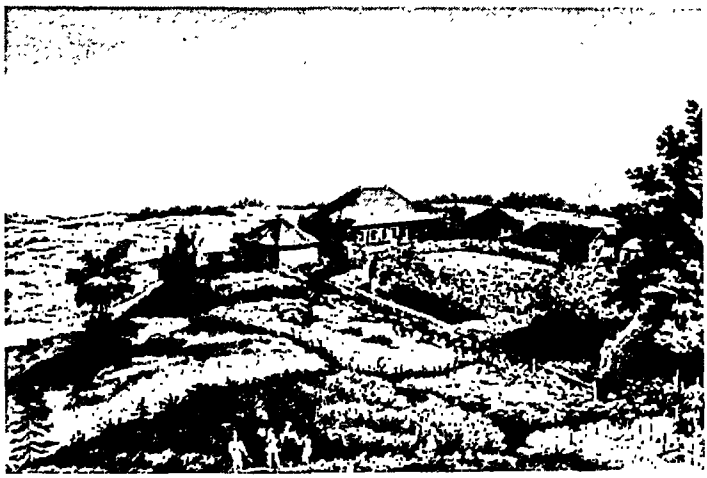
Hidden Characters

When people die, things carry on as before. Silent objects remind us that they are more lasting than people—an age-old truth. There are no inanimate objects, but there are inanimate people. Without Pushkin's possessions or the natural surroundings in which the poet lived it would be difficult to reach an understanding of his life and writing. In their time the poet's contemporaries were well aware of this and perhaps best of all Alexander Turgenev, who wrote of Pushkin's house, the pine-trees, lilac, promenade at Mikhailovskoye, and much else besides.

Today Pushkin's belongings are to be found in museums, where they live a peculiar, mysterious life all of their own, and where their keepers peruse the hidden characters they conceal. I have watched hundreds of thousands of people of different ages, backgrounds and interests at Mikhailovskoye, and they all had the one purpose in common: to come and see this "world" that the poet had lived in.

When I tell them: "Pushkin used to like sitting at that window," they all notice at those words that the window is something out of the ordinary, that none of them had ever seen a window like that before, that they had failed to see the green bush just outside it which is quite unique, that above that bush there is the sky just as it was in Pushkin's time, and clouds, and that in the paine is reflected the silhouette of a passing bird, just like those he may have watched.

Many many years after Pushkin was dead when the doors and windows were all peeling and the entrance to Pushkin's house was quite dilapidated—a riot of lilac still spread its fragrant clusters there. Someone's gentle fingers had planted and tended it till at last the lilac was tall enough to peep in at Pushkin's windows. Then everything was deserted and forgotten....



Village of Mikhailovskoye. By I. Ivanov. Lithograph. 1837

Arina Rodionovna, Alexander Pushkin's nurse. Bone carving by Y. Seryakov

Now the porch and the steps are straight and smooth once more, the windows are in good repair. More lilac bushes have been planted and just as in the past they offer up their flowers to the romantic traveller.

Each leaf of that bush can reveal hidden characters. Pushkin could decipher them, and in order to understand Pushkin the country and nature-lover, every visitor to Mikhailovskoye should attempt to puzzle them out as well.

When Pushkin was asked what his study was like he used to reply: "The countryside is my study."

The countryside or, in other words, nature: trees, grass, bushes, birds and animals. Pushkin loved this earth. He would walk through the woods without a coat, wearing only a simple shirt and often barefoot regardless of wind, rain or cold, by no means only when the weather was calm and warm. He saw that in Nature everything is timeless and that hardly anything ever changes, that Nature is eternity. It is only we people who change.

In the spring when life at Mikhailovskoye starts up again and people come out of the house they see and hear nothing but water, just as it was in Pushkin's day. Water seems to stream from everywhere, flooding the meadows and creating an enormous sea that swallows up all the streams and rivulets. The sea stretches across all the ground between the hills.

The scenery at Mikhailovskoye has its custodians. Pushkin writes of them in his poem *The House-Spirit*. The most faithful of them all is water.

Each day the trees, bushes, meadows and glades in the grounds show themselves to us in a new guise. Each morning the custodian of this gallery replaces one of the timeless pictures with another and reminds us as it were: "All this is what Pushkin beheld. Now you are to gaze on it. Let it inspire you."

When you visit Mikhailovskoye, make a point of going up to the fence round the estate, stand with your face to the little lake and shout: "Alexander Sergeyevich! " I assure you the answer is bound to come: "Ah-a-a! Co-oming! "

Pushkin Arranges his Study

Houses can teach us much about their owners, and often when we look at someone we can imagine to ourselves what his house must be like. Yet sometimes a house and its master have nothing in common with each other, which means that both the house and its occupants will look miserable. They will seem

restless and out of place. Then again a person can fit in so well with his surroundings that at times it will be difficult to decide where the house stops and the master of the house starts.

While working on the restoration of Mikhailovskoye I devoted much thought to Pushkin's house, trying to picture to myself how it would have been arranged and what it would have looked like. Pushkin himself and his friends who visited him here were far from forthcoming in their descriptions of the house!

Then I thought to myself that while far away in the South Pushkin had placed the heroes of his *Eugene Onegin* in just such a village, in the same kind of countryside that surrounded him in Mikhailovskoye. Far away in the South he thought back wistfully to the old family house built on the slope of a hill, th enormous meadows, the little river, and beyond them, the copses.

So Pushkin placed all his characters in this setting, in th heart of this Northern wilderness.

* * *

Pushkin spent a long time getting used to the house at Mikhailovskoye. He would ask himself what did he want with a mansion after all? While still a student at the Lyceum Pushkin had appreciated the great advantage of seclusion, "life in a cave". The rest of his life he had spent in a "humble cell", in a single room, whether in St. Petersburg, Kishinev, Odessa, in hotels or inns. He felt more able to collect and muster his thoughts in a single room, with everything to hand and surrounding himself with only the essentials. No time was wasted on the useless vanities and trivia of high society. No, never, never would he spend his time wandering about a large mansion. Never would he change his simple burrow of a room, his cave, complete with the faithful litle chest that served as a head rest, his travelling lamp, ink-well and the leather trunk that accompanied him wherever he went!

After his parents left, Pushkin spent a long time examining his grandfather's house. At first he was attracted by a room in the centre which had once been a reception room of Hannibal's*

* Abram Hannibal (1697–1781)—Pushkin's great-grandfather, a prominent military engineer and statesman. The son of an Abyssinian prince, he was brought as a prisoner to Turkey and then to Russia, where Peter the Great took the young boy under his wing.—*Ed.*

and where the walls were hung with portraits of his ancestors. The windows and the door on the Sorot side opened on to a balcony from which there was a wonderful view of the surrounding countryside. Yet other rooms led off this one and it was in bad repair: the wall coverings were in shreds and beneath the shreds nothing but a seething mass of bed-bugs. Instead he settled for the adjacent room which had been his parents' bedroom. Yet it had a mournful air about it and in bad weather, when fierce North winds were blowing, the through draughts were strong enough to carry his papers off the table.

There was a good deal of furniture and other objects dear to the heart of Pushkin's grandfather and parents in the room: the enormous chest of drawers for instance, its drawers sitting as tight as rotten corks in bottles of Tsimlyanskoye sparkling wine, armchairs and uprights—Pskov "Jacobean" and "Chippendale" that he had known from childhood, a billiard table with large tears in the green felt where the chipped balls were apt to stick. Double and single beds galore, cupboards, chests, couches, a mountain of pottery covered with knife and fork scratch marks, and simple earthenware. In the corner of his parents' bedroom stood a book-case containing surveyors' plans of the estate, the lakes, woods, villages, business and housekeeping papers, calendars, notebooks, a Bible and a few French novels, where mice and rats had been making havoc.

Then he found an old album with a bronze clasp and tied together with a pink ribbon. On the very first page he found a wreath of forget-me-nots and an anchor—symbol of hope. Underneath there was a dedication in his father's careful hand: "To my heart's angel, my inimitable Nadya from her faithful and devoted husband. July 1801." This was followed by a whole heap of bad verse-couplets, verses and sonnets. Pushkin smiled to himself and mused: "Faithful and devoted ... don't we know....!"

Yet how interesting to think that all the Pushkins, the whole family were poets. His father, mother, brother, sister, two uncles and Alexander Sergeyevich himself. A whole clan of poets, a Parnassus all of their own!

> Nadezhda, sweet Hope, my dear destinie,
> Oh whither, mine angel, art now flown from me?

And elsewhere:

> Felled by the fatal storm
> Shrivelled by great Perun, the oak lies on the ground,

While yet about its trunk the clinging ivy's wound....
Ah friendship, here is they symbolic form!

Yes ... dear old Sergei Lvovich, the poetic soul! How he used to let himself go!

Further on he came to:

A peaceful home, joy of my fleeting years—
Lake, forest, garden, all dear haunts of mine,
Where 'neath luxuriant trees I shed so many tears,
Where stillness eased my heart as it did pine
For you, my friends, ah more than I can tell,
To whom I now must bid a last farewell.

"The first two lines pass muster, they have something of my *House-Spirit* about them...."

With that he closed the album and pocketed it....

When he had surveyed the whole of the house Pushkin at last made his final choice, singling out a large light room with a south view looking onto the garden and the promenade and all the flower-beds. This particular room was always cheerful and sunny, and you could see the whole of the estate stretched out before you as if on the palm of your hand. Everything he needed was within reach and there was a good large fireplace, and a box-room to hand. What more could he ask for?

Pushkin then gave orders for the bailiff, the men-servants and his old nurse to be sent for. They began moving furniture about and removing part of it from the house altogether. Some pieces of furniture proved stubborn like aged relatives and refused to come out of the doors and so had to be thrown out of the windows. The men-servants were horrified at this sacrilege, but their master, nothing daunted, laughed gaily as he dispensed his orders. Everything of any value was moved out into Pushkin's parents' bedroom and the rest was taken out to be stored in sheds. The dining-room was turned into a shooting range. For targets there was the top of the enormous table and the books of études for the piano which Olga had once played, a whole heap of which had been found in the cupboard.

He gave orders for the central room to be doused down with boiling water and the wall coverings to be patched, and the ceiling whitewashed, after which it was designated as a room for the reception of members of the nobility of both sexes from the first five classes in the Table of Ranks, if such were to request an audience.

Later more orders were given: "His Honour's personal apartment is to be supplied with two book-cases, a couch, a

dressing-table and four armchairs. The bed is to be placed in the corner concealed behind a curtain which Nurse Rodionovna is to procure without delay. The travelling trunk is to be under the divan, while the box of pistols and books are not to be touched on pain of death! This shall suffice! "

Later when left alone Pushkin opened his writing case and casket to arrange his personal bits and pieces in his new study. Out came the portraits of Zhukovsky and Byron, his snuff-box, candle-holder, ink-well, "rough-book" and a hat-block Pushkin then moved one of the armchairs over to the window, clambered into it sitting on his heels and propping his elbows on the window-sill, and stared out into the garden. Not such a bad place after all! But by Heaven, by all the saints and martyrs, surely I am not destined to live here for any length of time? Perhaps even forever, till the end of my life? ... No! No! No! " He rose to his feet, opened the case with his pistols, went back to bhe window, aimed into the blue beyond and fired.

A flock of crows soared skywards from the tops of the nearby trees.

The Servants at Mikhailovskoye

The early days of his banishment in Mikhailovskoye seemed like a prison sentence to Pushkin. He was gripped by wild rage and everything irritated him. He sulked, shouted at people, sought to drown his sorrows.... He would send for a horse in the early morning and just ride off into the distance, and this particular galloping horseman might often be encountered far, far away from Mikhailovskoye. Both steed and rider would be covered in sweat when they came home. The poet used to ride the length and breadth of the surrounding country—as far as Novorzhev, Opochka, Ostrov, Pskov, Porkhov and on one occasion went almost as far as Novgorod.

Then there was abrupt change, and Pushkin all of a sudden felt as happy as the day is long at home in Mikhailovskoye. What had happened? It was work that saved the situation. Pushkin grew attached to the local countryside, found loyal friends in Trigorskoye.... But that was not all. He discovered the simple country people and they opened their hearts to him.

All at once he was confronted by a whole new world of folk culture. He started to spend whole days and nights in the village and pay frequent visits to the servants' quarters. He witnessed in person a traditional wedding ceremony which he was subsequently to record. He was a guest at peasant festivities and

acted godfather at a number of christenings. On the second Monday after Easter he would join the peasants for their traditional visit to the cemetry to honour the memory of their dead. On winter evenings he liked to sit in the servants' quarters or his old nurse's room listening to folk-tales and songs, many of which he noted down and was later to use for his writing. He was fond of balalaika music and appreciated how this simple instrument provided a key to the Russian people's soul. He fell in love with one of the girls, who answered his affections. Pushkin became acquainted with the life of the peasants not only as far as its hardship was concerned, but also came to understand the immortal beauty of age-old customs and traditions, the secrets of the character of the Russian peasant. All this new knowledge Pushkin was to glean here, in Mikhailovskoye.

In near-by Pskov in the State Archives it is possible to study the *Census Lists* for Mikhailovskoye for the years 1825, 1836, and 1838. These enable us to learn the exact names of all the house-serfs of both sexes living in Mikhailovskoye at the time that Pushkin was there. From this source we can find out not only their names but also their trades and their ages. When the poet was in exile, there were seventeen serfs there, while in the year of his death there were only nine. The remainder had either been transferred to Boldino at his parents' instructions or taken to work in the St. Petersburg household.

In the *Inventory of Mikhailovskoye* carried out in accordance with the ukaz issued by the Opochka trustees for the family and property of A.S. Pushkin on May 18, 1838, by the district police superintendent Vassyukov and attorney Pastukhovsky in the presence of two witnesses, all immovable and movable property in this village belonging to the Pushkin family is listed, including the Mikhailovskoye serfs.

In that year there were nine:
Eremei Sidorov, aged 75, shepherd;
Avdotya Sergeyeva his wife, aged 61, dairy-maid;
Her son-in-law Pavel Kurochkin, aged 51, coachman, groom and blacksmith;
His wife Avdotya, aged 36, milk-maid;
Avdotya Arkhipova, aged 37, poultry-maid;
Dmitri Vassiliev, aged 31, forester, watchman and gardener;
Praskovya, niece of Old Ulyana living in St. Petersburg, formerly employed by A.S. Pushkin as a nurse, aged 18, maid of all work;

Nastasya, daughter of Vassili Mikhailov, aged 23, serving-maid in the master's house and the outbuildings;
Daughter of Darya Andreyeva, who is now employed in St. Petersburg by Olga Sergeyevna Pushkina, aged seven years.

But what did they look like? Have any pictures of them been preserved? It used to be assumed there were none, but this assumption was a mistaken one. One does exist.

In the spring of 1837, at the request of Alexander Turgenev, M. Vilyegorsky, G. Stroganov and the poet's wife, supported in this project by the governor of Pskov A. Peshchurov, Ilya Ivanov, a Pskov land-surveyor, paid a visit to Mikhailovskoye in order to record for posterity the place where Pushkin had lived and worked. The well-known artist P.A. Alexandrov subsequently made a lithograph from Ivanov's drawing, which was reproduced thousands of times over and is familiar to everyone. The drawing shows the garden and immediate surroundings of the poet's house and outbuildings complete with flower-beds and little paths; Ivanov depicts Pushkin on horseback, his friends the Osipovs riding along in their coach and the old nurse, Arina Rodionovna, standing on the tumble-down porch. Yet there is something else included in the lithograph usually dismissed as a chance group of peasants included to enliven the landscape.

Yet in actual fact here we have an old man with a crooked staff, who is of course Old Eremei. Then the other seven figures returning home after hay-making with rakes and scythes over their shoulders are none other than the complete staff of serfs: Praskovya, niece of Ulyana, Nastasya Mikhailova, Dmitri Vassiliev and the rest. Finally the little girl with plaits walking along beside the adults is, sure enough, Darya Andreyeva's little daughter.

Thus it emerges that Ivanov's sketch entitled *Village of Mikhailovskoye* depicts not merely Pushkin's estate but also the serfs the poet knew and loved so much, from his old nurse Arina Rodionovna to the little daughter of Darya Andreyeva.

Ilya Ivanov was not an artist but merely a surveyor and draughtsman. Consequently his sketch was distinguished by its precision. The familiar lithograph virtually brings to life the *Inventory of Mikhailovskoye.* We have no other drawings of this historic spot, which renders the sketch unique and priceless.

"Bringing Before Thee Thine of Thine Own"

Pushkin had long since looked upon Mikhailovskoye as lost to him. By 1835 his parents had decided to sell the place so as to improve their financial straits. For them Mikhailovskoye was just one of the family estates, a pleasant spot to spend the summer in. For the poet, on the other hand, Mikhailovskoye had been a source of spiritual regeneration and the place where he had found refuge from troubles that beset him. Life to Pushkin was unthinkable without that little village and it was only after long hesitation and endless arguments with his parents, his sister and her husband that Pushkin finally let himself be persuaded that Mikhailovskoye should be sold....

Yet here was Pushkin again in the familiar Mikhailovskoye surroundings. He had come here because his mother had bid him do so as she lay dying. She had been suffering from a painful illness and, knowing that she was dying, had sent for Alexander. She begged him to forgive her for lavishing her affection on his brother and neglecting him throughout her life. This sin was torturing her because her love for Lev had fallen on stony ground. The neglected son was the one who came to her and asked for forgiveness, and together they wept and grieved. Pushkin asked to be forgiven for taking umbrage as the unloved son, for his vain mode of life, comforted his mother with gentle words of kindness which brought far more consolation to the dying woman than any confession, prayers or extreme unction would have done.

When she felt death close at hand, the old lady made Pushkin promise that he would not leave her ashes in Petersburg.

"I know that you are busy, that you have no time," she said. "Yet promise that you will take my body to our estate."

The poet vowed solemnly that he would do as she asked.

Pushkin's mother died in his presence during Easter Week. With her death Pushkin found himself burdened with a large number of formalities. A coffin, priests, the funeral service, bureaucratic niceties in order to obtain permission to take the dead woman's body out of St. Petersburg. All this had to be seen to and it was money, money all the way that was required and that had to be borrowed at any price, regardless of the rate of interest.

But at last everything was over and Pushkin was able to start on his way.... In a shabby coach with seats for four hired at the St. Petersburg main post-office the poet set out taking with him

a coffin in a large wagon specially fitted out to take such sad cargo over long distances.

The party made slow progress. The spring of 1836 was a warm one and the road was barely passable. Beyond Luga it disappeared altogether in the spring floods. To break their journey and stop over near wayside houses and taverns was something the poet felt awkward about, and what was more it was not allowed according to the special regulations applicable to the transport of bodies to their resting-place. The regulations only allowed stops near churches, which explains why Pushkin spent nights at Gatchina, Luga, Krasnopolye, Pskov and Ostrov. Each time he stopped a requiem service had to be sung.

It seemed they would never reach their destination. Pushkin was bruised all over after the never-ending bumps and ruts in the road. He also felt dizzy from all the incense and mournful chanting in the churches. Indeed, he felt ill beyond words.

On arriving in Pskov Pushkin was planning to go and visit the city governor, Alexei Peshchurov, the kindest of souls, but after imagining to himself the inevitable questions that would be showered upon him and the stereotyped words of condolence, he decided against such a step. Instead he merely went into the shop of a certain Lapin, gave instructions for the drivers to be given some vodka, while he himself went to the bishop's house to have his travelling permit signed and make arrangements to have another requiem sung.

It was not until dawn on the fourth day that Pushkin reached the Svyatogorsky Monastery. Not even the monastery had started its activities for the new day yet. Interminably long and angry knocking was required before the porter came to let them in. By this time Pushkin was so angry that he had difficulty in stopping himself hitting the man's sleepy face into the middle of next week. The porter ran to fetch the Father Superior and the latter soon appeared: he glanced through Pushkin's papers, fingering the large seal that looked like a copper, five-kopek piece, and asked: "Which service do you want celebrated, Sir? "

"What do you mean, which service! ? "

"I am asking whether you want the simple service or the more ceremonial office? Do you want the service to be conducted in the main church, with a full complement of candles and a choir? Or just the simple service? "

"Oh, I want things done the proper way," Pushkin replied absent-mindedly, anxious to be done with all formalities. The Father Superior turned to the porter and gave instructions for

the funeral cavalcade to be let in, the coffin to be carried into the upper church, and for candles and icon-lamps to be lit.

Pushkin asked the Father Superior to send one of his novices to Mikhailovskoye to instruct the village elder to send some men to the monastery straightaway to start digging the grave.

It was the last day of Easter Week – the most festive of the whole year. The monastery bells rang out with their lively Easter peals. The faithful started to assemble, for the most part tipsy. During that week, in accordance with an old Russian custom, all sinners and the sinless alike were at liberty to indulge in the pleasures of this life: eat, drink and be merry! ... Pushkin alone was in a gloomy state. Merry spirits were something that had deserted him long ago, and he now found it difficult even to imagine what he was like in a merry mood.

The poet walked out into the monastery grounds. He stood for a while near the porch of the lower wooden Church of St. Nicholas where there hung a picture illustrating the transient brevity of this earthly life, complete with doggerel composed by the Father Superior, Iona. This picture that he still remembered from ten years ago showed earth and heaven, the sun and the moon and a round clock that served as a reminder of time's quick passage, and implacable Death armed with a scythe and pointing with a bony hand towards the clock. Beneath the clock was a large crooked pine-tree on which the artist had attached a scroll bearing the following words:

O, Mortal, look, mark, learn, and inwardly digest,
How swiftly thy life flies, how soon thou'lt meet with Death!
Prepare each hour, with bitter tears and rueing,
Lest Death should take thy soul in its ill-doing.
Inexorable Death will never linger
But points how brief our span with warning finger...
The hours and times and years pass in a wink
While we, like to the Sun, from East to West do sink.
Come, man, and with enlightened faith and meek,
Come, enter in God's house thy humble prayer to speak,
And whilst right zealously thy prayers arise
Look on these lines with moved and heartfelt sighs.

Memories started flooding back. This was the grave of Pimen, one of the first superiors at the monastery. It was here that Pushkin had first visualised his Tsar Boris*.... Yes, here

* i.e., Boris Godunov, hero of the historical drama which Pushkin wrote in 1825.—*Ed.*

were the monastery walls, here was the cell where in the past he had spent hour upon hour in edifying conversation with his spiritual mentor, Father Superior Iona. Here was the cell of his friend, the monk Vassili, that splendid and quite incredible rogue exiled from the capital, the monastery librarian and archivist, thanks to whom the poet had realised that the devil is often not so black as he is painted...

Where was everyone? It was all past history now. Iona and Father Vassili were no longer among the living. The monks were new and the novices likewise, and indeed, Pushkin himself was a changed man now...

Pushkin made his way up to the top of the hill, counting the stone steps as he went. There were thirty-seven and that reminded the poet that he, too, would soon be thirty-seven.... How strange! Then the poet went over to the family cemetery. He greeted the peasants, sat down on a bench and watched the gay abandon with which they were throwing up spadefuls of gold sand from the grave they were digging.

Yet what a fine place this really was! High up, dry, the trees rustling and no meaningless bustle. There was the fine old white church, and the road down which he had often walked on his way to the ancient monastery. This is the right place for me, not swinish Petersburg, here and nowhere else. "Bringing before thee thine of thine own." But how do you go about it making sure of a place in the family cemetery?

Pushkin could not shake off this thought, and the whole day he was haunted by the words from the ancient canon: "Bringing before Thee Thine of Thine own in all and for all."

The poet's mother was buried at two o'clock in the afternoon, and after the ceremony Pushkin left for Mikhailovskoye. He spent a long time walking about the house and peering at the things that stood there as if he was looking for something. Then he shut himself away in his study and went to bed immediately without giving any orders to any of the servants. The next morning he called for a horse to be saddled and once more set off for the Svyatogorsky Monastery. When he had only gone halfway he had the horse taken back while he himself continued on foot: he always found it easier to think when walking along. After going in through the gate of the monastery Pushkin walked up the slope to his mother's resting-place. The grave was already covered with turf. Some kind attentive soul had decorated the grave with snowdrops and springs of pussy-willow. At the end of the grave there stood a

simple cross of pine-wood. An inscription still had to be composed. But why should he, Pushin, do it? His father would write it. He was a past master at epitaphs.

It had grown very quiet. Easter Week was at an end. There was not a soul around—no peasants talking about the master turning up at Mikhailovskoye, no monks who the evening before had had every opportunity of scrutinising the famous moor.... The thoughts about his own tomb that had occurred to him the day before had now taken concrete shape in the poet's mind: "Here lies Pushkin. This is where Pushkin must lie. Here at this spot and nowhere else."

With agonising clarity the thought came to him that Pushkin no longer existed. He is irrevocably dead like the people lying over there at the foot of the hill.... No! I don't want that.... After all, what is death? For men's deeds are not measured only in terms of their earthly lives! ... Once again the thought concerning his last journey, of his own grave at home here in Mikhailovskoye floated to the surface. "Bringing before Thee Thine of Thine Own."

How sad that Voinych was not at his side. He had experience in everything, knew how to manage any situation. Pushkin began to compose a letter to Nashchokin in his mind: "Voinych, my dear friend, you are plagued with illness but give no thought to the possibility that you could die. I have to think about all that for you. The question of a cemetery is no idle matter, but on the contrary, a most important one. Well, you know my friend, you would be most unlikely to find a better cemetery anywhere than that in my village near Pskov. The earth is so fine, it's more like a featherbed. Then the view, the vistas are a miracle to behold.... When my time comes I shall leave instructions for my body to be buried here next to yours, I give you my word of honour! ..."

On the evening of that day, the last before the poet returned to St. Petersburg, Pushkin paid money into the monastery coffer to make sure of a plot of earth when death should overtake him. In the ledgers where details of monasterial revenues and expenses for 1836 are kept the Father Superior made the following entry: "Received from A.S. Pushkin ten roubles for a place in the cemetery. A contribution to monastery funds was also made by the aforesaid gentleman in the form of a bronze candlestick decorated with malachite, and an icon of the Mother of God with a silver framework and encrusted with pearls."

These belongings Pushkin had taken with him from the house at Mikhailovskoye. He knew that he would not be coming back there again. For Pushkin Mikhailovskoye was already part of yesterday. It did not exist for him any more. All that was left were memories, and tomorrow perhaps there would not even be a trace of those.

Professor and Farm-Worker Recite from the Seventh Chapter of "Eugene Onegin" at Mikhailovskoye

Each year on the first Sunday of June, the people of Pskov and large numbers of visitors from everywhere under the sun gather at the PUshkin estate in Mikhailovskoye. This fine tradition has been kept up ever since 1924, when the centenary of Pushkin's arrival at Mikhailovskoye, for his period of exile, was celebrated.

On that occasion leading writers, artists and scholars gathered together. The then President of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Alexander Karpinsky suggested that an annual festival be held there to mark the poet's burthday. "These festivals," he pointed out, "should be festivals of poetry and friendship between the peoples."

This proposal bore fruit, and as Irakli Andronikov was to write: "There has been nothing like it before in our country. Nowhere has such a large number of guests been welcomed in any one place all at once. The number of guests is all the more surprising in view of the fact that none of them are specially invited. They make their own way to Pushkin, because they feel they have to come."

For a good many years now Pskov country has abounded with a wealth of books by and about Pushkin. Before the war each of the forty schools in Pskov District and each village club had a collection of Pushkin books. Pushkin's works were also to be found in the private libraries of many farm cottages.

At Pushkin Hills a first-class public library was set up by a special team of experts from the Academy of Sciences and the Leningrad City Library. It numbered close on ten thousand books on Pushkin and his times and the poet's own works. Here you could find works by leading Russian poets, writers, critics, autographed copies of works by Korolenko, Koni, Maikov, Gorky, Lev Tolstoi. Each writer or artist who visited Mikhailovskoye regarded it as a point of honour to donate a book to the library there.

But then came the war. Everything was destroyed by the nazis. Driven by a fierce hatred of Russia and the Soviet people they attempted to wipe out Russian culture and the very name of Pushkin from the face of the earth. Yet Pushkin proved invincible. All that was linked with the name of Pushkin was brought back to life again as soon as the war was over and the enemy had been driven out of the country.

The Pushkin estate was brought back to life as well.

At the time of liberation Mikhailovskoye was little more than a sorry ruin. The roads and lanes on the estate were so encumbered as to be impassable. Everywhere there were but craters and other litter of war. Gaunt chimneys were all that was left of the villages. At the "boundary of the ancestral home" were overturned exploded tanks and cannon. Along the bank of the Sorot River were the blasted remains of German reinforced pill-boxes. And everywhere there were row upon row of barbed wire and notice-boards saying: *Beware of Mines, No Through Road, Caution!*

There were few people around in those days apart from soldiers busy clearing the fields, woods and meadows of mines. From time to time loud explosions would rend the air.

In the gardens of Mikhailovskoye former inhabitants of the surrounding villages were soon to make for themselves a temporary camp in the former Nazi dug-outs and bunkers. They took the dug-outs to pieces and used the logs to build new huts in place of the old ones which had been burnt down. In a large clearing near the entrance to the estate a camp was set up for soldiers, whose primary task was to clear the Pushkin estate of explosives. At times it seemed as if the war was still going on. But no, the expressions on people's faces were full of calm joy and everyone was eager to build up again all that had been destroyed but that they were determined to resurrect.

Preparations for the first post-war Pushkin Festival in 1945 were particularly enthusiastic. The tradition that the war had interrupted could now continue. The atmosphere was one of excitement, although we were all very poor in those days and almost each one of us had suffered personal bereavement. Everyone worked hard to put their own gardens and Pushkin's in order for the occasion.

On the morning of June 6th some ten thousand people gathered at Mikhailovskoye. There was not a horse or car in sight though, everyone had come on foot, some people had covered a distance of up to thirty miles. There were many cripples and war-veterans among the crowd. It was like a rally of

those who had survived the Nazi invasion. On a make-shift arch hung an improvised portrait of Pushkin with an inscription on a red calico ground that read: *Welcome Pushkin!* In the centre of the main clearing where the army field kitchen had been set up visitors could avail themselves of tea. Tea with sugar what was more! On Kern Avenue portraits of Pushkin were on sale and books on Mikhailovskoye that had just been printed for the occasion in Pskov.

Among the guests at that particular Pushkin Festival was a well-known scholar from Leningrad University, the late Professor Vladislav Evgeniev-Maximov, a fervent devotee of Pushkin and an inspired speaker. On hearing that the traditional Pushkin Festival was to take place as usual, the professor decided that despite his advanced age and disregarding the advice of his relatives, it was his duty to attend, indeed an honour.

At that time the journey to Mikhailovskoye was a real adventure. The train journey from Leningrad to Pskov took almost forty-eight hours. From Pskov to Pushkin Hills the journey had to be made on horseback or on passing army lorries and then only as far as the river Velikaya near the village of Selikhnovo. There was no bridge across the river for it had been blown up and anyone who wanted to get any further in the direction of Novorzhev or Pushkin Hills had to cross that river on a makeshift raft.

All this was in store for the valiant old professor as well and by the time he eventually arrived at his destination he was much the worse for wear.

At last the proceedings were opened. Evgeniev-Maximov took the floor. He delivered a moving speech about Pushkin's greatness, his patriotism and the way in which Pushkin had helped our fighting men rout the invaders during the war years. In the course of his speech the Professor quoted a passage from the seventh verse of the seventh chapter of *Eugene Onegin.*

> At times above that humble urn
> The early wind would softly breathe
> And through the dangling pine-boughs yearn
> And sway the uninscribed wreath.

When he came to the words:

> And by the grave, their arms entwined,
> By moonlight they would stand and weep,

he forgot how the passage continued and an awkward silence fell. Then all of a sudden one of the audience, a tall, bearded

old man rose to his feet and came to the rescue with the lines that had slipped the professor's memory:

> But now... the mournful monument
> Is quite forgot. The path is now
> Unused. No wreath hangs from the bough;
> Alone beneath it, grey and bent,
> The shepherd sits and sings again
> And weaves bast shoes for countrymen.

The professor did not interrupt the old man but respectfully listened to him reciting the verse to the end. At the end of his address an astonished Evgeniev-Maximov came up to the stranger and, greeting him with a grateful hug, suggested they sit down a little to one side of the crowd and have a talk.

"Tell me, my dear fellow, who are you, what are you and where do you hail from?"

The old man replied that his name was Antonov, that he lived locally in the village of Avdashi and had been working at the local collective farm ever since it had first been set up in 1929. Then it emerged that the old peasant knew by heart not only the seventh chapter of *Eugene Onegin*, but the whole work from start to finish. He told the professor that in his youth he had even tried his hand at writing verse himself, but had got over that and started reading Pushkin....

"However terrible life was under the Germans I always had my book of Pushkin with me. I had bought it here at Mikhailovskoye a good forty years ago. For me and my family it was one of our rare comforts in those grim years."

* * *

This story of the peasant Pushkin-lover I was later to tell to Sergei Vavilov, the then President of the Academy of Sciences when I submitted my next report on the progress of restoration work at the Pushkin Museum. Vavilov at once asked his secretary to bring him a one-volume edition of Pushkin.

Before handing me the book to give to old Antonov, the Academy President wrote the following dedication in it: "To dear Comrade Antonov in memory of the 146th anniversary of Pushkin's birth celebrated at Mikhailovskoye, wishing you a long and happy life,

"Gratefully yours,
"Sergei Vavilov."

Guardian of Mikhailovskoye

Pushkin's house in Mikhailovskoye although it is a museum still has a life of its own. It radiates warmth and light and is most welcoming. The rooms are always filled with the scent of mellow wood and fresh earth. When the pines in the nearby copses flower, a cloud of fragrant pollen hovers above the house. When the lilac, jasmine and rose-hip bushes burst into bloom the house is filled with their fragrance. There are always fresh flowers to be found in every corner. Not all of them are in large luxuriant bouquets, as they would have been arranged in the old days, but some simply in small bunches dotted about in inconspicuous places.

Then comes the time for the limes to flower. They fill the house with a scent of wax and honey. The limes grow next to the house and wild bees live in their hollow trunks. Bees also live in the earth in front of the house. Badgers and racoons visit the grounds in September, when the nights grow longer and people sleep longer, and treat themselves to the honey.

In autumn apples from the orchards are brought into the house to be stored. The apples are exquisite and of every possible sort and variety. The scent of apples mingles with the scents of flowers and honey. This makes the rooms seem to radiate a still more inviting warmth.

Inside the house there is evidence of a good deal of white Pskov linen—table-cloths, towels, curtains. Linen has a smell all of its own, cool and heady. When the linen articles in the house become shabby from age they are replaced with fresh ones woven by local weavers on old-fashioned looms.

Linen material possesses a remarkable quality—wherever it lies, it creates a sense of freshness. Scientists maintain that linen keeps a man healthy. People who sleep in coarse linen sheets, wear linen underwear next to their skin or rub themselves down with linen towels hardly ever suffer from colds. Pushkin, too, rarely suffered from such ailments in this house where there was such a rich supply of linen.

Pushkin's serfs, like all those in the Pskov area, were past masters at growing flax, and Pskov linen had been famous throughout Russia and beyond her borders since time immemorial. Two hundred years before Pushkin's time a special English trading company had been set up in Pskov to buy up flax and linen articles to be sent to England.

In those days unbleached linen was used to upholster chairs, couches and armchairs and to make bed curtains. Over

Pushkin's bed there was a curtain of this type as his friend Pushchin recalls.

The rooms that Pushkin once lived in are filled with a smell of cleanliness and sunshine thanks to the linen, the flowers and the apples, even though at the height of the season thousands of people may pass through them in a single day.

* * *

It is a far from simple task to prevent the rooms of a museum house from showing the signs of countless visitors. Very important in this respect is keeping a house as clean as possible and making the most of the fragrance of the gifts of the earth. No less important is who looks after the museum. By no means everyone can take care of a museum properly. This is not an art that can be learnt. Some can outdo any manual of museum research, are regular encyclopaedias, and can explain all the whys and wherefores, yet the past that they should bring alive for us, remains dead and academic, whereas others make everything they so much as touch come to life. It is hard to pinpoint the reason for this, yet there is no denying this all-important gift.

For many years Alexandra Fedorova, a simple peasant woman, was in charge of the domestic running of Mikhailovskoye. She had a real talent for museum work although she had never had any special training. Indeed she only learnt to read when she was middle-aged and started working at the museum. It was then that she realised that to work in Pushkin's house without being able to read was out of the question, because her work involved not merely looking after the house and devoting herself to its care, but also understanding it and those who came to visit Pushkin.

Nature endowed Alexandra Fedorova with a gift for bringing to life all she touched. Her touch transformed and imparted new life to everything around her: she used to keep a careful watch over the grounds, make sure that all was in order in Pushkin's rooms and always knew where everything was. Her simple words used to fill the rest of us with joy. On occasions her kind lips were to utter reproaches when any of us learned characters might forget to put back the cover protecting some Pushkin relic or absent-mindedly light up a cigarette in a place where smoking was not allowed. Nothing used to escape her eagle eye. In the mornings, after putting things in order for the day, Alexandra Fedorova liked to sit in the customary pose of

the Russian peasant woman by the window of the most hallowed of all the rooms—Pushkin's study—and busy herself with some needlework or other. More than likely, Pushkin's old nurse Arina Rodionovna used to sit at that window engrossed in some similar occupation. Sometimes, while a group of visitors was being taken through the museum, someone would exclaim: "Look—a perfect copy of Arina Rodionovna! " Indeed, there was a resemblance, for Alexandra Fedorova was deeply attached to Pushkin and all that was linked with his memory—his papers, books, belongings: her love for the poet like that of his old nurse had something maternal about it.

Alexandra Fedorova, or Aunt Shura as she was known by the museum staff and visitors to Mikhailovskoye, has always possessed a magic touch. Whether she was putting Pushkin's rooms in order, dusting the furniture, arranging flowers or putting out vases on the various cabinets, tables and chests of drawers, the result was always perfect, and anyone coming to the museum always exclaimed quite involuntarily: "Oh, but how beautiful!" when they took their first peep inside.

During the twenty years Aunt Shura worked at Mikhailovskoye she came to know which light brought out the most in each picture, the best way to clean the mahogany furniture, the bronzes and the mirrors. She never needed any reminders as to what needed rearranging, or when the cornflowers or daisies needed changing. She always noticed what needed doing at once and immediately saw to it.

On one occasion we decided it was important to get hold of an old-fashioned linen curtain for the servants' quarters in Mikhailovskoye, and I mentioned the matter to Aunt Shura.

"Wait a moment and I shall run over to the village beyond the lake, where one of my folks used to live. The war passed them by and you can still find all sorts of old things there."

Before I had time to blink, the good soul had covered the fifty odd miles there and back and brought back to Mikhailovskoye the most beautiful of antiques that are not to be found anywhere nowadays for love or money.

Then another time a collector of old Pskov folk-songs came to Mikhailovskoye and asked me to put her in touch with old inhabitants of the local villages who might remember old folk-songs and still be able to sing them for her to tape.

Once more I turned to Aunt Shura and asked if she knew anyone who could help. Horses were harnessed and the three of us set off for the village of Romashki, where she introduced us to an old man and his wife by the name of Pavlov. The old man

was a treat to behold with his pink face, blue eyes and white beard and so welcoming: in happy excitement he at once climbed onto the sleeping-bench in his cottage and brought out a little chest where he kept his accordion that was trimmed with copper and bore the inscription: "This instrument was fashioned in Novorzhev in 1858 by Razveyev, craftsman for the musical arts."

Then he took up his instrument, sat down on a bench, played a few chords, and then fell silent. The two women sat down next to him, linked hands and moved up close to each other waiting for the old man to give them the signal to begin. At his nod they struck up with the song *Hey, My Fine Young Man*, a rare old wedding song of the Pskov country which long ago would have been sung to bridegrooms on the eve of their wedding-day:

Hey, my fine young man,
Where did you ride and walk,
Where did God guide your steps?
Hey, sweet maid, I rode
From town to town.
Hey, sweet maid, I sought,
I sought myself a bride,
I sought myself a blooming bride and young.
A bride indeed I found, but now with her I know
Neither content, nor any joy at all.

The old women explained to us that for this particular song one person would sing the words while another would sing another part but without words.

After this the old women got into their stride, and we were able to record some wonderful traditional songs.

I shall always remember how Alexandra Fedorova helped us collect together traditional ornaments, furniture and hangings for the newly restored cottage, which at one time had housed the estate office, the kitchen and the granaries. In the winter, in thirty degrees of frost she and I sat off to visit neighbouring villages to look for pieces of traditional embroidery, hand-woven fabrics, peasant dresses, crockery. I remember how frozen we were, how we almost fell through the ice when we were crossing the river Sinyaya to reach the village of Sinsk, where Pushkin had once spent the night.

Aunt Shura was a most attentive listener when we told the visitors about Pushkin, his life in the country, the friends who

came to visit him at Mikhailovskoye, his loneliness, tears, torments and melancholy.

When any new guide started work at the museum or a student came to Mikhailovskoye for his practicals, they always made a point of asking Aunt Shura to listen to them showing people round and give them her comments. The old woman would listen most carefully and hardly ever made a mistake when assessing their competence.

On Mondays the Pushkin house is closed to the public. That day is set aside for major cleaning operations. Although this fact is noted in all reference manuals and guide-books, nevertheless visitors still turn up and ask to be shown round. If they asked nicely the old woman was bound to let them have their way and show them into the museum after all, reminding them as she did so: "I have just tidied up, scrubbed and waxed the floors so please take your boots off before you have a quick look round." Everyone obediently doffed their boots and came quietly into the hallowed rooms as if they were entering a church.

Aunt Shura was a past master at making time stand still. When she spoke about the house it was as if she was reading from the scriptures. As she led the visitors through the rooms of the museum the visitors would be hearing something far more interesting than any guide's potted history—a folk tale about Pushkin. Without any preamble, Aunt Shura would launch straight into her story: "This was where Pushkin lived in torment for two years and a month. Here all is his. Though you cannot see him now, he sees all, who comes here and why they come, who comes with a good heart, who comes to learn, and who comes just to admire himself in the mirror and bathe in the river. Pushkin loved everything that has life and wrote about it all in his books. Today everyone comes to Pushkin, because his works shield us from evil and cleanse our souls. His house does for the people of today what a church did for them in the past. If your heart is troubled and you have no one to turn for advice, come to Pushkin: he will help you understand who is your true friend and hold you back from a false step—his advice will set you on the right path and bring you joy and happiness. Just you think carefully what you need and then ask Pushkin for help, and you will find the answers to all your questions in his books...."

In the room that belonged to Pushkin's old nurse she used to recite to visitors Arina Rodionovna's letters to the poet written in Mikhailovskoye. In Aunt Shura's rendering these

letters were particularly appealing, indeed they seemed more like her letters than someone else's: "For all your kind favours we thank you from the bottom of our hearts, you are with us always in our thoughts."

Aunt Shura, like Pushkin's old nurse, exemplified all the finest traits of an old Russian peasant woman, kindness, an open heart and warm love for her fellow-creatures. In age, and indeed appearance as well, the two women had a good deal in common, if we go by Arina Rodionovna's portrait carved in bone by the artist Seryakov in the forties of the last century. Both of them had slightly upturned noses, firm mouths and deep wrinkles. They both used to wear sleeveless fur jackets and head-scarves.

Alexandra Fedorova was one of a long line of Pskov peasants. She herself had been born quite near the Pushkin estate in the village of Nosovo on the other side of the Sorot River. Her grandparents had been serfs in Trigorskoye. When a young girl she had worked as a day-labourer in Trigorskoye or Mikhailovskoye, wherever there was work to be had in vegetable gardens or orchards. Life was far from kind to Alexandra Fedorova. Her family was very poor. She married young and shortly before the war her husband volunteered for construction work near Leningrad, where she and her daughter went to join him, and they all lived in hostel quarters. When the war came bringing disaster in its wake, she had to make her way back to her native village on foot. Her husband disappeared without trace. The district round her native village was partisan territory, and Alexandra Fedorova helped the freedom-fighters in whatever way she could. Although she did not know one end of a gun from the other and was not sent on reconnaissance work, she did all she could to help provide food for the partisans, until, towards the end of the war, her house was burnt down by the Nazis and she was driven out of her devastated village.

After the war a new chapter in Aunt Shura's life began: she came to work at the Pushkin Museum that became a new home for her in which she was to spend almost twenty years, until, at a ripe old age, she returned to her native village to live out the rest of her days.

After Alexandra Fedorova left Mikhailovskoye, the place was like an abandoned orphan somehow: it was a long time before we could believe that the old woman would be in our midst no more, and that we would no longer hear the gentle voice saying: "Listen to me for a moment, my son...."

When in 1967, a Leningrad newsreel team came down to make a film entitled *The First All-Union Pushkin Poetry Festival at Mikhailovskoye* I advised the director to go to the village of Nosovo and invite Aunt Shura to come and take part. The director brought her back to Mikhailovskoye with him and their work together proved a great success. If you want to hear and see Alexandra Fedorova, try and see this film. You will not regret the effort!

This world is of course full of miracles, and museums are particularly rich in them, for they are indeed custodians of miracles. "Alexandra Fedorova—the custodian of Mikhailovskoye—was a true miracle." These words are not mine but belong to the poet Mikhail Dudin, a frequent and most welcome visitor to Mikhailovskoye. He, like many other writers and artists, knew Aunt Shura well and was very fond of her. His affection for her is aptly expressed in his poem *At Shura's Hands I Look.*

At Shura's hands I look, and wonder,
And read her works as in her face.
They are like oak-roots, groping under
The earth, as rough and stern and tender
As she herself, as summer thunder,
And all her life is there to trace.

Here long experience of great worth
In clear, plain characters I've read
Deeply engraven: by the earth,
By spring-time steam and drought and dearth,
By mushrooms, honey, cooking hearth,
By fire and fruit and milk and bread.

These hands have borne with endless patience
All that life offered them to bear:
Love's sadness, longing, separation,
A mother's pangs and perturbation,
And even the mortal desolation
Of damp earth in a grave-yard drear.

All that these hands have made and done
In future years will prosper still,
And so will all their works to come,
And so the link with times now gone
Will hold, so long the thread is spun
By their life-giving, sacred skill.

Pushkin's Undaunted Neighbours

Not far from Trigorskoye between the Sorot and Velikaya Rivers there is a beautiful bend in the river where the banks of the Velikaya widen to form sloping meadow-land on which here and there bushes of broom are to be seen.

Here you will find a small old village that was once part of the township Voronich (a suburb of Pskov), but later incorporated into the Trigorskoye estate of the Osipov-Wulf family. Now this village is part of the Pushkin collective farm.

For several hundred years on end all the inhabitants bore the surname Egorov. They were all related to each other with various degrees of closeness. The present inhabitants are descendants of old-time Egorovs, but they go by different names nowadays. Moreover, all their names are linked with Pushkin in one way or another. This is how it all happened.

In the Jubilee Year (1937) the rural population was issued with internal passports. When the initial lists were drawn up and the officials concerned started work, they were at a loss what to do—this whole village consisted of nothing but Egorovs. What was more, most of the men were Egor Egorovich Egorovs. How on earth could things be sorted out? The passport officials discussed what should be done with the villagers and suggested that everyone should select a new surname, whatever might take his fancy.

Everyone started asking for the name Pushkin, and a few of the villagers were lucky enough to have their request granted, but by no means everybody. Then all the Egorovs started selecting for themselves names of Pushkin's friends or fellow students at the Lyceum, names that were very much in people's minds at the time because of the jubilee. This gave rise to a whole crop of Pushchins, Nazimovs and Ryleyevs. Eventually a "ban" had to be placed on those names as well. When it came to the turn of one of the old Egorovs and his wife, most of the interesting possibilities had been exhausted. The old man decided to remain a Egorov, but his wife finally settled on a surname which although it had no direct association with Pushkin nevertheless had a romantic ring to it—Duelskaya!

After she had been issued with her passport the old woman set off that very same day to Pushkin Hills where she bought a coloured print of Shestopalov's *"Pushkin's Duel with d'Anthès"* in the local bookshop. She brought it home and nailed it proudly to the wall of her cottage in the same corner where her wedding candles stood side by side with an icon depicting St.

George of Voronich—patron saint of all men of Voronich and the Egorovs.

The old couple had lost count of the years and could no longer remember how old they were, but nevertheless they continued to work on the farm thus earning the respect of the whole community.

Their house stood slightly apart from the rest of the village and was as old as they were. It leant over to one side a fraction but was still perfectly solid. Next to the house there was an ancient wild pear tree whose branches leant against the roof of the house. The branches were so thick that it was difficult to say where the roof ended and the tree began.

Behind the house was a small fruit-garden with apple and cherry trees, a narrow path winding between them. The path led down to a large retting pit, where in the past the whole village had soaked its flax and hemp.

The years went by and nothing changed in the day-to-day pattern of the old people's lives.

Then war came to this quiet little world.... Under enemy occupation life became more terrible than their wildest dreams.... The German soldiers and officers who came were all in a hurry, shouting and dispensing frenzied orders. Everyone was made to chop down trees, move logs, dig trenches, build dug-outs.... There was no let-up in the unending work. Then one day the police arrived and the inevitable SS. Everyone was ordered to leave their houses and move off heaven knows where under army convoy. When the outcasts had made their way to the top of the hill overlooking the village their eyes were met by an enormous bonfire in place of their native village.

They marched on for what seemed an endless train of days and nights until at last the order was given for them to halt and be resettled.

In 1944 an end was put to the fascist horrors, and all the villagers made their way back home again.

The old people did not recognize their home. Everything was changed and seemed to be on a miniature scale. Everything breathed damp, rust and destruction. Their orchard was gone, their house was gone. All that remained of their house was the stove.... Russian stoves are indeed the hardest thing in the world to destroy!

The villagers set to work to dismantle the enemy dug-outs, bunkers and log pill-boxes. There were a good number of them and the Germans had seen to it that they were all well built out of good logs, several layers thick. After all it was first-class

timber they had used from the copses of Mikhailovskoye.

Everyone started to build themselves new houses.

"And what are we going to do?" the old man asked his wife.

"What are we going to do? —the same as everyone else of course," the old woman replied. "We'll build us a new house too. We'll collect up logs and start building. What is there to it, after all?"

God alone knows how these old people contrived to collect up all the logs they needed and heave them into place. Good-hearted neighbours like the Pushkins and Yazykovs did give a helping hand of course....

At the end of a year the house was ready and the old man and his wife took on a new lease of life. So did the old pear tree: new shoots appeared and started to lean down towards the roof.

But one fine day, as the saying goes, sappers came to the village and set up a camp there near the river. Each day they would go out into the fields and examine the earth sod by sod.

Then disaster struck. When the sappers came to the old man's garden their instruments registered iron under the earth and they grew worried. The officer in charge gave instructions for them to dig over the ground and when some of the top layers had been removed a black pit was unearthed that formed a tunnel leading under the ground right up to the old man's new house. The pit was large and there was dynamite all round it. In the middle lay a regular hoard of Nazi shells in a thick coat of dark, smelly grease. The shells were laid out in neat straight rows and there was no end to them.

The sappers went cautiously about their work. A hushed silence fell as the officer thought over what he and his men should do next. He weighed up the situation, took another look, and then summoned the old man.

"Look, Grandad, this is how it is," the officer began. "You see how things have turned out ... but don't take on now, will you? You have my word as a Soviet officer.... We won't leave you in the lurch. My men are a grand lot and can tackle any job. You name it, we've got it— carpenters, first-rate joiners—the lot! We'll take your house apart in a jiffy and move it over there out of harm's way. Then before you can say knife we'll explode all this stuff and the whole thing'll be over. We'll dig over the pit, even the place over and put your house back just as it was. We'll put in it such good shape that it'll look better than ever."

The old man did not say a word by way of reply. He was left speechless.

After covering up what they had unearthed, the officer and soldiers went away promising to come back the next day to carry out the operation.

"Well what are we going to do now? " the old man said to his wife.

"What are we going to do? " the old woman echoed. "There are no two things about it. We'll have to do the job ourselves."

She went back into the garden to the path that led to the retting pit. The old people understood each other at once. Words were hardly necessary.

As soon as the sun started to set, they quietly opened up the hole again and set to work. The moon was bright that night and so there was plenty of light to see by. It was almost as if the moon had joined in their "plot". Carefully they took the shells out of the hole one by one and carried them off down the garden path to the retting pit, where they lowered them into the water. They worked right through the night until they had taken out the last of the shells.

When the sappers turned up the next morning they found the old man sleeping under the pear-tree, like a log.

The officer noticed the well-trodden path leading down to the retting pit, went over to the hole where the shells had been, saw it was quite empty and after that no explanations were required.

Then he went into the hut with the coloured print hanging in the corner showing Pushkin fighting his duel with d'Anthès. The old woman was lying on the bench nearby.

"Granny, come now, Granny! " called the officer.

No answer was forthcoming and so he called again: "Granny! "

"Well, what d'you want? " the old woman whispered back as if she was still asleep and without opening her eyes. "If you've come about the carpenters you can tell them to take the logs out of that hole.... They're splendid logs. My old man's been all miserable because we haven't got a bathhouse and I miss it too. Give us a hand, won't you?"

The officer who had seen plenty of strange things in his time, rose quietly to his feet, turned and crept on tiptoe out into the garden. Feeling quite at a loss he flopped down on the ground to collect his bewildered thoughts.

* * *

I also felt well and truly bewildered when I first heard that story. A real wealth of goodness and readiness to come to grips with hardship are necessary for people to be able to endure such catastrophes in old age. Old people after all are just as fond of life as youngsters are. But for the old people it is far harder to start out again from scratch, especially if the life they had been living before is brought to an unexpected end, earlier than necessary.

May God grant the old man and his wife many good years yet.